



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Pakistan Political Unrest: In Brief

Updated September 3, 2014

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R43717

Summary

Beginning on August 15, 2014, Pakistan's struggle to establish a sustainable democratic system has met with a new reversal in the form of major anti-government street protests in the capital. Crowds led by opposition figures have demanded the resignation of democratically elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The prime minister regards such demands to be inconsistent with the Pakistani Constitution, and the consensus view in Islamabad appears to support parliamentary processes. The strident and rigid nature of the protestors' demands, and their unwillingness to disperse from areas surrounding key government buildings has, however, created an impasse. After two weeks, the powerful Pakistan Army announced that it would act as "facilitator" in seeking resolution. This has led many analysts to anticipate a new round of military intervention in the country's governance. While few assess that Sharif's government now faces an imminent threat of ouster from office, many observers see the current unrest weakening Sharif and representing a setback to democratization in a country that has suffered three outright military coups in its 67 years of independence.

To many analysts, it appears unlikely that Pakistan in the near future will alter any of its foreign or security policies of interest to the United States. However, the U.S. government has sought to help in fostering Pakistan's democratic system, and that effort has been disrupted by the current unrest. The Pakistan Army's more openly direct control of the country's foreign and security policies may, over time, shift Pakistan's approach toward Afghanistan further into a policy framework that seeks to counter Indian influence there. It could also present new challenges to the goal of improving India-Pakistan relations, and put a damper on hopes for effective regional cooperation and commerce in South Asia.

Contents

Overview	1
Latest Developments in Islamabad.....	2
Background	3
Recent Political Unrest	4
A Troubled Civilian Government.....	4
August-September 2014 Protests	5
Khan and the PTI	6
Qadri and the PAT	7
Government Response	7
Role of the Army	8
Implications for U.S. Interests.....	8
Regional Security and Stability	9
U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan.....	9
Pakistan-India Relations	9
Regional Commerce.....	10
Democratization	10

Contacts

Author Information.....	11
-------------------------	----

Overview

Pakistan has waged a decades-long struggle to establish a sustainable democratic system in which elected civilian leaders have clear primacy over the country's military. In August 2014, this effort appears to be meeting with another potentially serious reversal as ongoing political protests in the capital may trigger a new round of direct military intervention in the country's governance. Such an outcome could jeopardize a number of U.S. interests.

The democratically elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, seated in May 2013, has come under strident, highly visible criticism from two opposition figures and their followers: Imran Khan, leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Parliament's second-largest opposition party; and Tahir-ul-Qadri and his Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) party. On August 15, these two leaders—acting separately, but, some suspect, with tacit support from or in collusion with the military¹—were able to amass an estimated 30,000 anti-government protestors in the heart of Islamabad, and many thousands remain in place in early September.² Both have held fast to demands that Sharif resign his office: Khan accuses the prime minister's party of election fraud, while Qadri complains of a broader systemic illegitimacy and corruption. After two weeks of peaceful protest, violence erupted in the final days of August, killing three and injuring hundreds more.

Prime Minister Sharif regards the protesters' demands as unconstitutional, and the political consensus in Islamabad appears to agree, with the view widely held that a forced dissolution of elected assemblies would significantly undermine what most observers have seen as major progress in democratization over the past six years. All political parties also appear to agree that substantial electoral reforms are required and that the Election Commission of Pakistan requires an overhaul.

Pakistan's military, now led by Army Chief General Raheel Sharif (no relation to the prime minister), has launched three overt coups in Pakistan's 67-year history, and has dictated the country's foreign and national security policies even when not directly governing. In late August, the Army announced that it was taking a "facilitative" role in resolving the political impasse, a step that many analysts see as a precursor to what they say would be a "soft coup" in which Sharif might be reduced to a "ceremonial prime minister" who lacks any formal authority over the country's most sensitive policy making. The International Crisis Group warns that the current crisis is a grave threat to Pakistan's fragile democratic transition and opens the possibility of "the military ruling through the back door."³

The Obama Administration has taken a low-key posture toward Pakistani unrest, but it has emphasized its support for democracy and rule of law. As articulated by a State Department spokeswoman on August 20,

We support the constitutional and electoral process in Pakistan, which produced Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. That was a process they followed, an election they had, and we are

¹ See, for example, "Pakistani Leader Sharif Nears Pact with Military," *Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2014, and "Army's Questionable Decisions" (editorial), *Dawn* (Karachi), September 2, 2014.

² Roughly 30,000 security forces are also reported to have been deployed in the capital ("Tens of Thousands of Protesters Break Through Barriers Protecting Pakistan's Parliament," Associated Press, August 19, 2013).

³ "Pakistani Leader Sharif Nears Pact with Military," *New York Times*, August 27, 2014; International Crisis Group, "Conflict Alert: Protecting Pakistan's Threatened Democracy," August 21, 2014.

focused on working with Pakistan. And we do not support any extra-constitutional changes to that democratic system or people attempting to impose them.⁴

In later comments, the State Department spokeswoman said U.S. officials were “carefully monitoring” developments in Islamabad, and “continue to urge all sides to refrain from violence, exercise restraint, respect the rule of law. Peaceful protest and freedom of expression are, of course, important aspects of democracy, and that’s certainly a message we’re conveying.”⁵ One scholar and longtime Pakistan-watcher opines that Washington’s most helpful role can come through full-throated support for the current government—despite its pursuit of policies sometimes vexing for U.S. officials—in the vital long-term interest of strengthening Pakistan’s democratic system and institutions.⁶

Because political unrest is ongoing, final resolution of the current protests remains uncertain. Yet the general desire of all sitting opposition parties (other than PTI) to adhere to constitutional and parliamentary processes—combined with the Army’s apparent aversion to intervening directly—suggests that the Sharif government will remain in office, albeit in a much-weakened state.

Implications for U.S. interests are likewise unclear, but are most likely to be negative in the context of Pakistani democratization, along with some added challenges related to fostering Afghan stability, Pakistan-India rapprochement, and perhaps even Pakistan’s economic development. Moreover, if chaos continues effectively to paralyze Pakistan’s governance mechanisms, regional terrorist groups could see an opportunity to exploit the instability.

Latest Developments in Islamabad

- On August 27, after nearly two weeks without a public statement on the crisis, Prime Minister Sharif told the Parliament that he would not be intimidated by the protests and that “the supremacy of law and constitution will continue in Pakistan.”⁷
- On August 28, Punjab police allowed registration of a “First Information Report” that reportedly names 21 people, including the prime minister and Punjab chief minister, as potential culprits in the June killing of 10 opposition activists in Lahore.⁸
- On Friday, August 29, the Army formally stepped in to play a “facilitative” role in breaking the deadlock, ostensibly at the request of the government. Yet Prime Minister Sharif told Parliament that he had nothing to do with the Army’s decision, even as his interior minister indicated that the government endorsed only a “facilitative” role, and did not accept the Army as “mediator and guarantor.”⁹
- Violence broke out over the weekend of August 30-31, reportedly beginning when paramilitary Frontier Corps troops fired tear gas at what they saw as an encroachment of the grounds of the prime minister’s residence. Three people

⁴ See the August 20, 2014, transcript at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/08/230777.htm>.

⁵ See the August 28, 2014, transcript at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/08/231125.htm>.

⁶ Christine Fair, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, email communication with authors, September 3, 2014.

⁷ “Pakistan’s Prime Minister Resolved to Ride Out Protest Crisis,” Reuters, August 27, 2014.

⁸ “Pakistan Police Launch PM Murder Probe to Defuse Crisis,” Agence France Presse, August 28, 2014.

⁹ “Pakistani Premier Denies Asking Army to Mediate,” Associated Press, August 29, 2014.

were killed and several hundred injured in an ensuing melee in which police used batons and fired rubber bullets at protesters. This marked the first such incident in the heretofore peaceful mobilization by Khan and Qadri.

- The PTI now appears to be facing a splintering in its upper ranks: senior Khan ally and party president Javed Hashmi, formerly a lieutenant to Nawaz Sharif, claimed on August 30 that Khan had violated a pledge to his own followers that they would not march on the prime minister's residence and had overruled other senior party leaders in escalating the protest. Hashmi went on flatly to blame Khan for any imposition of martial law.¹⁰

Background

The United States has taken an interest in assisting the creation of a more stable, democratic, and prosperous Pakistan that is actively combating religious militancy. This has been among the most important U.S. foreign policy efforts in the post-9/11 period. Many Americans believe that the United States has vital interests at stake in U.S. engagement with Pakistan. These are related to regional and global terrorism; efforts to stabilize neighboring Afghanistan; nuclear weapons proliferation; links between Pakistan and indigenous American terrorism; Pakistan-India tensions and conflict; democratization and human rights protection; and economic development. As a haven for numerous Islamist extremist and terrorist groups, and as the world's most rapid vertical proliferator of nuclear weapons, Pakistan presents a combination that places it at the top of many governments' international security agendas.

The U.S. government has sought to help in developing Pakistan's economy and boosting the effectiveness of its security forces. Islamabad has been among the leading recipients of U.S. foreign assistance in the 21st century, receiving more than \$20 billion in overt transfers since 2001.¹¹ While such assistance has contributed to some successes, Pakistan remains racked by militancy and terrorism, and is suffering through an extended period of inflation, unemployment, and weak economic growth.¹²

The history of democracy in Pakistan is marked by ongoing tripartite power struggles among presidents, prime ministers, and army chiefs. Military regimes have ruled Pakistan directly for 34 of the country's 67 years of independence, and observers agree that Pakistan has no sustained history of effective constitutionalism or parliamentary democracy. The country has had five constitutions, the most recent ratified in 1973 (and significantly modified several times since). From the earliest days of independence, the country's armed forces have conceived of themselves as "saviors of the nation," a perception that has received significant, though limited, public support. The military, usually acting in tandem with the president, has engaged in three outright seizures of power from elected civilian governments: by General Ayub Khan in 1958; General Zia ul-Haq in 1977; and General Pervez Musharraf in 1999.

¹⁰ "Pakistani Army Calls for Calm After Protest Turns Deadly," *New York Times*, August 31, 2014.

¹¹ Congress has appropriated nearly \$16.4 billion in foreign assistance to Pakistan for FY2002-FY2013, including more than \$9.4 billion in economic, development, and humanitarian aid, and another \$6.9 billion in security-related aid. Pakistan has also received more than \$11 billion in Coalition Support Fund (CSF) payments to reimburse the country for its logistical and operational support of U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan.

¹² *Foreign Policy* magazine's 2014 index of "fragile states" ranked Pakistan 10th of 178, citing group grievances (discrimination, sectarianism, etc.), militancy, and the intervention of external actors as especially acute problems. These same issues have kept Pakistan near the top of the index listing for six consecutive years (see <http://ffp.statesindex.org/2014-pakistan>).

Pakistan's most recent national election, in May 2013, ousted the incumbent, Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led coalition government headed by then-President Asif Zardari. The democratic exercise was seen by close observers as having been relatively free and fair, although accusations of vote-rigging were widespread. Those charges against the victorious party were a key motivator of the street protests that erupted in August 2014.¹³ The election winner, Nawaz Sharif—a two-time former prime minister from a prominent Punjabi industrialist family—had returned to Pakistan from exile in 2007, eight years after General Musharraf unseated him in a bloodless 1999 coup. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) party had won approximately 33% of the popular vote and 166 of the Assembly's 343 seats. Subsequent late-joiners provided an outright majority. Of the 320 Assembly members present to vote in the new prime minister in early June, more than three-quarters supported Sharif. Many observers in the United States, Pakistan, and elsewhere saw the peaceful transfer of power—the first in Pakistan's history from one elected government to another—as a historic milestone in Pakistan's struggle to establish sustainable representative government.¹⁴

Recent Political Unrest

A Troubled Civilian Government

The government of Prime Minister Sharif took office in May 2013 with what many viewed as a vast electoral mandate (at the very least in the Punjab province, where a majority of Pakistanis reside) and a vow to focus on reversing negative economic trends. While it has made modest progress on this front, the country's serious energy crisis remains unresolved, exacerbating public disenchantment. Still, a recent Pew Research Center survey of Pakistanis found that public support for Sharif has been enduring in recent years—his approval rating of 64% is virtually unchanged since the election—and, perhaps more significantly, Pakistanis appear to be notably less pessimistic about the future: Since last year, the number saying the economy has improved more than doubled to 37%, and satisfaction with the direction of the country more than tripled to 25%.¹⁵

Upon taking office, Prime Minister Sharif immediately faced multiple serious issues that have proven extraordinarily difficult for him to address effectively. The national economy's rate of growth has been in general decline since 2005 and falls well below that needed to keep pace with population growth. Power shortages are rampant and hinder business productivity. Pakistan has

¹³ According to the EU's Election Observer Mission to Pakistan's 2013 election, "A strong democratic commitment was demonstrated ... by the state authorities of Pakistan, civil society, political parties and voters," and despite escalating militant attacks. However, this mission also identified "fundamental problems" with election laws and enforcement, and noted allegations of "rigging" (see the Mission's final report at http://www.eueom.eu/files/pressreleases/english/eu-eom-pakistan-2013-final-report_en.pdf; see also the final report of the Joint Observer Mission of the National Democratic Institute and the Asian Network for Free Elections at <https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI-ANFREL-Pakistan-EOM-Final-Report.pdf>).

¹⁴ After 1970, five successive Pakistani governments were voted into power, but not once was a government voted out of power—all five were removed by the army through explicit or implicit presidential orders. Of Pakistan's three most prominent Prime Ministers, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was executed; his daughter Benazir Bhutto was exiled, then later assassinated; and Nawaz Sharif suffered years in exile under threat of life in prison before his 2007 return. Such long-standing political turmoil partially explains why the smooth transfer of power in 2013 was historic in nature (see "The Calculus of Electoral Politics in Pakistan (1970-2008)," Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, January 2008, at <http://www.pildat.org/publications/publication/elections/CalculusofElectoralPolitics.pdf>).

¹⁵ See the August 27, 2014, findings at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/08/27/a-less-gloomy-mood-in-pakistan>.

acute security concerns both at home and abroad: Domestically, a “Pakistani Taliban” fights government troops in western tribal areas, claiming responsibility for suicide and bomb attacks in Pakistani cities; sectarian terrorists target Shia Muslims; and a decades-old separatist war persists in the vast southwestern Baluchistan province abutting Afghanistan and Iran. Meanwhile, Pakistan views both India on its eastern border and Afghanistan to the west as strategic threats.

The PML-N itself comes under criticism for perceived fecklessness. Beyond an annual budget, Parliament has failed to pass a single new law under Sharif. Important posts—including that of foreign minister—remain unfilled, and regulatory agencies have no chiefs.¹⁶ Moreover, the party suffers from ongoing criticism that it is too centered around one family (Nawaz is Prime Minister and party leader, and his brother, Shahbaz, is the chief minister of Punjab), and that Sharif himself maintains an autocratic and detached ruling style. Many observers feel that Sharif has neglected to reform Pakistan’s sclerotic governance system as his supporters apparently expected. One prominent analyst offers that Sharif’s rule has continued to be “dynastic” (as in his previous terms), with a “kitchen cabinet” of unofficial advisors and a lack of responsiveness to public sentiment.¹⁷

Perhaps most significantly, relations between the Sharif government and the powerful Pakistani Army—already fraught due to the Army’s 1999 coup that ousted Sharif—began to deteriorate further in 2014, when Sharif allowed the launch of a legal effort to prosecute former President and Army Chief Pervez Musharraf for treason.¹⁸ Sharif later stood by and defended Geo News, one of the country’s leading news outlets, when Geo accused the military of attempting to assassinate one of its leading journalists. He also pursued a policy of negotiations with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP or “Pakistani Taliban”), even as that terrorist group continued to launch deadly attacks, and as the Army was intent on launching offensive operations. Army leadership also was reported to be unhappy with Sharif’s commercial overtures to India.¹⁹ Sharif’s perceived air of detachment from the country’s woes and his increasingly poor relations with the generals appear to have combined to embolden some of his political detractors to take to the streets, by many accounts with covert or implicit prodding from the Army.²⁰

August-September 2014 Protests

On August 15, 2014, thousands of anti-government protesters marching under the banner of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), a populist opposition party led by former cricket star Imran Khan, arrived in Islamabad. Also demonstrating in the heart of the Pakistani capital were followers of Tahir-ul-Qadri, a Canada-based Pakistani cleric whose Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) has no legislative representation, but who has amassed large anti-government crowds in the past. Although both protest’s leaders have maintained rigid demands that Prime Minister Sharif resign office, their longer-term objectives differ, and each has been careful not to associate directly with the other. There were no overt signs of collaboration between the PTI and PAT in the lead-up to

¹⁶ “How Pakistan’s Sharif Stumbled Into Protests Crisis,” Reuters, August 25, 2014.

¹⁷ Shuja Nawaz, Director, South Asia Program, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, telephonic communication with authors, September 3, 2014. See also Cyril Almeida, “A Rare Certainty in Pakistani Politics—Nawaz is Doomed” (op-ed), *Guardian* (London), September 2, 2014.

¹⁸ There were reports that Sharif had further angered the military by reneging on an alleged secret agreement to allow Musharraf to leave Pakistan after a “symbolic indictment” (“Pakistani Leader Sharif Nears Pact with Military,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2014).

¹⁹ “Pakistan Protest Leaders Hold Talks with Government,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 2014.

²⁰ See, for example, “Pakistani Leader Sharif Nears Pact With Military,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2014 and “Army’s Questionable Decisions” (editorial), *Dawn* (Karachi), September 2, 2014.

the protests, apart from their agreeing to a basic four-point agenda on honoring democracy and the Constitution.²¹ Even as the protests converged on the same location where federal government buildings are concentrated, Khan and Qadri did not share a stage for two weeks, nor did they give any other appearances of coordination. Both continuously instructed their followers not to occupy government buildings or embassies, and to remain peaceful at all times. Despite the Sharif government's generally lenient bearing toward the crowds, the duration of the protests and number of citizens assembled created a precarious balance that was unlikely to be maintained indefinitely. With both Khan and Qadri unwilling either to escalate the protests by moving to occupy government buildings or to simply abandon their protests, an impasse was reached.

Although the dual "marches" included tens of thousands of people, and have shaken Pakistan's political system and gained international attention, the sentiments of their leaders do not appear to be widely shared among the population writ large. In the words of one analyst, "Unlike some past anti-government movements in Pakistan, these protesters never had a wide base of public support from which to mobilize, and polling suggests that their demands were fundamentally unpopular with the electorate."²²

Khan and the PTI

Imran Khan's PTI holds about 10% of all National Assembly seats and also leads a coalition government in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPk) provincial capital of Peshawar. His "*azadi*" (freedom) march is the latest expression of popular anger over year-old allegations—trumpeted especially loudly by Khan—that the 2013 elections were rigged by Sharif's PML-N. The PTI protest has sought to force Sharif's resignation and subsequently launch early national elections under a caretaker government. Moreover, Khan has demanded extensive electoral reforms and prosecution of those involved in the alleged vote-rigging. The PTI's media-savvy practices allowed the party to build considerable momentum for its cause despite the persistence of militancy and economic woe in KPk more than a year after the PTI took power there. In an effort to preempt PTI's public protest, Prime Minister Sharif had offered the concession of forming a new election review panel composed of Supreme Court judges, but Khan has remained rigid in his demand that Sharif resign.

After the first week, Khan's protest march appeared to lose momentum, with his demands becoming inconsistent and his overall strategy unclear.²³ He set numerous "48-hour deadlines" for Sharif's resignation, only to change his mind. Khan's wavering actions and demands alienated him from large swaths of the country's media and created divisions within his party.²⁴ At one point, he called for the resignation of all of his party's parliamentarians, but was rebuffed by his provincial legislators.

²¹ "PAT, PTI Announce Agreement on Four-Point Agenda," *Dawn* (Karachi), August 12, 2014.

²² Joshua White, Deputy Director, South Asia Program, Stimson Center, email communication with authors, September 3, 2014.

²³ Khan's remains generally popular with a 53% favorability rating, but is on the decline following a 2012 peak of 70% (see the August 27, 2014, Pew Center findings at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/08/27/a-less-gloomy-mood-in-pakistan>).

²⁴ The editors at *Dawn*, Pakistan's leading English-language newspaper, have been openly disdainful toward Khan's protests as they have unfolded, with one commentary dubbing Khan's calls for civil disobedience "a sad and ignominious path" ("Inglorious Ending" (editorial), *Dawn* (Karachi), August 18, 2014. A review of many negative reactions to Khan's effort is "Imran a 'Joker,' 'Full of Hot Air' or 'A Rewal Problem,'" *Dawn* (Karachi), August 17, 2014.

Qadri and the PAT

Tahir-ul-Qadri's concurrent protest has been dubbed the "*Inqilab*" (revolution) march. Qadri is regarded as nonpartisan and moderate, and is known for his 2010 fatwa against jihad and his 2013 march that threatened to bring down the previous Pakistani government on charges of corruption. His PAT party has only held one parliamentary seat since its 1989 inception and has been unrepresented in any body since 2007, but it maintains a strong organizational base in Lahore, the capital of Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. Qadri reemerged on the national political stage in June when police clashed with PAT workers in Lahore, resulting in 14 deaths. The PML-N's provincial government in Punjab was slow to react, and did not move to prosecute any officials in connection with a perceived "massacre."²⁵ With his popular support galvanized by resulting outrage, Qadri flew from Toronto to Lahore and announced a "grand march" of his own. His core grievances are far broader than Khan's: Qadri contends that the current democratic system is broken due to its feudal underpinnings and requires complete overhaul.²⁶

Government Response

Prime Minister Sharif's response to the protests has been inconsistent, but his government repeatedly rejected initiating any violent crackdown. Immediately prior to the marches, authorities deployed shipping containers to obstruct major arteries linking Lahore and Islamabad, but these quickly were bypassed by protesters. As the marchers approached the capital, the government warned them not to enter the "Red Zone," an area of the capital housing the Parliament, Supreme Court, Prime Minister's residence, and several embassies. However, when the protestors continued to move toward this neighborhood, they were not stopped by security forces and were allowed to camp just outside the Parliament building. The protesters remained there for 17 days before a number of them encroached on the PM's residence grounds and elicited a forceful police response on August 31.

The Pakistani leader's willingness to negotiate with both the PTI and PAT—and to pursue deeper electoral audits and reforms—has not altered the protest leaders' maximalist positions. Opposition parties and third party political forces have maintained that the demand for the Prime Minister's resignation is unconstitutional, and the National Assembly has passed multiple resolutions affirming the supremacy of the constitution. Most in the parliamentary opposition have stopped short of declaring that Khan's charges of election rigging are unfounded. Indeed, some have suggested that significant fraud did take place, but contend that Khan's present tactics are not proper for seeking redress.²⁷ Sharif seems to be satisfied with expressions of confidence in his leadership of the National Assembly, as he did not address the nation and Parliament until two weeks after the unrest had begun.

²⁵ "JIT Declares Shahbaz Responsible for Model Town Massacre: Qadri," *News International* (Karachi), August 27, 2014.

²⁶ Qadri calls for "true democracy" in Pakistan, which for him means devolution of power "to the grass-roots," a limit to the number and role of federal ministries, and the division of Pakistan's current 4 provinces into 35. He also envisages a "green revolution" for Pakistan that would entail an array of "free" medical care, education, land for poor farmers, and other benefits for the lower and middle classes (Tahir ul Qadri, "My Vision for a Democratic Pakistan" (op-ed), CNN.com, August 20, 2014).

²⁷ Former President and opposition leader Asif Zardari favors an investigation by the courts and election commission. Prior to the marches, he had expressed solidarity with Imran Khan's view on alleged election fraud ("Mediation: PPP Committee to Help Resolve Political Imbroglio," *Express Tribune* (Karachi), August 26, 2014; "Zardari Backs Imran's Stance on Rigging," *News International* (Karachi), August 6, 2014).

Role of the Army

For most of Pakistan's history as an independent nation, the military—dominated by the army—has been the public's most trusted and admired institution.²⁸ Analysts are divided on the role of the army in this latest bout of serious political unrest in Islamabad. Circumstantial evidence suggests some links between Khan, Qadri, and Pakistan's military establishment, and numerous analysts identify a more-or-less coordinated effort between the military and the unfolding of the latest crisis.²⁹ Observers doubt, however, that the army would seek to take direct control of the government, not least as it is embroiled in offensive operations against Islamist militants in western tribal areas.³⁰ Yet some pundits contend that the army might welcome (or be engineering) a "soft coup" in which popular support for the civilian government is reduced such that the army can take full control of foreign and security policies. One report suggests that Prime Minister Sharif was told through intermediaries that he would have to "share space" with the military, but that the generals were not engineering a coup.³¹

As of early September, the army has not taken any overt role in addressing the public protests. Orchestration by the generals at Army General Headquarters in Rawalpindi was more widely suspected when an army spokesman issued a social media message calling for "patience" from "all stakeholders," suggesting that the military leadership was less than categorically supportive of the government. This led some commentators to speculate that the army was threatening to intervene politically.³² The Prime Minister has met the Army Chief numerous times since the outbreak of the protests.

Implications for U.S. Interests

At present, experts expect few, if any, notable adjustments in the near-future to Pakistan's policies that are of international interest. According to one longtime DC-based analyst, there is little reason to anticipate any major changes in Pakistani policy on issues of special interest to the United States in the short term, but "serious hope for a gradual consolidation of effective democratic rule" has been dimmed by the latest upheaval.³³ Yet the unrest is likely to have significant impact on Pakistan's already difficult domestic circumstances, and thus potentially for U.S. interests in the region. The Pakistan army's reclaiming of more direct and robust control of the country's foreign and security policies may, over time, shift Pakistan's approach toward Afghanistan further into a policy framework that seeks to counter Indian influence there. It also

²⁸ According to a recent Pew Center survey, public support for the military is very high at 87%, an 8-point increase since 2013 (see the August 27, 2014, findings at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/08/27/a-less-gloomy-mood-in-pakistan>).

²⁹ One scholar claims that both Khan and Qadri are "widely acknowledged" to have close ties to the army. Upon Qadri's June return to Lahore, he indicated that he did not trust the government, and requested an escort from a member of the armed forces. Supporters were heard chanting "Long live the army" (Marvin Weinbaum, "How Protests and the Military are Diminishing Pakistan's Democracy," *Foreign Policy* (online), August 12, 2014; "Anti-Govt Cleric Returns to Pakistan, Supporters Clash With Police," Reuters, June 23, 2014).

³⁰ Arif Rafiq, "Beware Pakistan's Possible Democracy Death Spiral," *National Interest* (online), August 13, 2014.

³¹ "Pakistan Crisis Puts Army Back in Driving Seat," Reuters, August 20, 2014.

³² "Pakistan's Political Path," *Economist* (London), August 20, 2014; "Political Impasse: Army Makes Pitch for Meaningful Dialogue," *Express Tribune* (Lahore), August 20, 2014; "Déjà Vu" (editorial), *Dawn* (Karachi), August 21, 2014.

³³ Daniel Markey, "The National Security Implications of Pakistan's Latest Political Crisis," *Just Security* (online), August 27, 2014.

could present new challenges to the goal of improving India-Pakistan relations, and put a damper on hopes for effective regional cooperation and commerce in South Asia.

Regional Security and Stability

The U.S. government's more acute security interests related to Pakistan include nuclear security and proliferation, counterterrorism, Afghanistan stability, and normalization of Pakistan-India relations. Any new erosion of the ability of Islamabad's civilian leaders to oversee (or make) the country's security policy likely will not affect the nuclear realm, which has long been assumed to be wholly ruled by the military. With regard to counterterrorism and domestic counterinsurgency, Washington has for years been confounded by and disappointed with the Pakistan Army's apparent willingness to distinguish between Islamist militant groups, and to spare from meaningful pressure those that are deemed useful as proxies with which to counter Indian or Afghan influence. However, in the areas of Afghanistan stability and Islamabad's relations with New Delhi, any marginalization of the Sharif government could have negative implications for U.S. interests.

U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

As the United States winds down its military operations in preparation for a withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington has looked to Islamabad as a crucial partner in ensuring Afghan stability and prosperity after 2014. However, Pakistan's security establishment, ever fearful of strategic encirclement by India, has, by many accounts, continued to view the Afghan Taliban as a relatively friendly and reliably anti-India element in Afghanistan, one that can help to provide Pakistan with "strategic depth." The Army's 2014 North Waziristan offensive was publicly debated months in advance, and it is widely believed that most of the militants that pose a threat to U.S. interests, such as the leaders of the Haqqani Network, were able to flee across the Durand Line into Afghanistan. In August, the State Department announced new bounties for Haqqani leaders; whether it did so on the assumption that Pakistan's civilian government was losing influence over the country's Afghanistan policy remains unclear.³⁴

Pakistan's alleged material support of the Afghan Taliban—a group that Islamabad actively supported until September 2001—is a crucial concern for leaders in both Afghanistan and India. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's perpetual distrust of Pakistan has led him to look to India for support, including in the realm of defense articles and training. Both of the leading prospects to assume the Afghan presidency have relatively positive dispositions toward New Delhi. Upon taking office in mid-2013, Prime Minister Sharif sought to improve Pakistan's relations with Afghan leaders, but little progress was made, ostensibly due to Pakistan Army resistance. The present weakening of Sharif's government and corresponding (re-)empowerment of the Army could undermine efforts to foster cooperative regional policy toward stabilizing Afghanistan.³⁵

Pakistan-India Relations

Tensions between Pakistan and India grew in August, apparently unrelated to the unrest in Islamabad, where political instability only serves to reduce already thin prospects for

³⁴ "Militants Slip Away Before Pakistan Offensive," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2014; see the August 20, 2014, Rewards for Justice notice at <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2014/230778.htm>.

³⁵ Michael Kugelman, "Why Afghanistan Should Be Worried About Pakistan's Political Crisis," *Foreign Policy* (online), August 20, 2014.

rapprochement between Islamabad and New Delhi. The Sharif government had shown a strong interest in resolving outstanding disputes with India and deepening bilateral ties both commercially and more broadly. Many independent observers see the Pakistani Army obstructing efforts to deepen trade with India because it seeks a resolution of territorial disputes as a prerequisite.³⁶ Significantly, Sharif attended the inauguration of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in late May, when the two leaders agreed to resume a wide-ranging dialogue that has been on hold since a late 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai.

In the ensuing months, however, Prime Minister Sharif's clout within the Pakistani establishment apparently diminished, and with it the influence of the political and business constituencies for better relations with India. Indian reports of attempts to infiltrate separatist militants across the Kashmiri Line of Control (LOC) into Indian Kashmir have become more common over the course of the summer, perhaps in correspondence with Sharif's waning influence. When the Pakistani ambassador to New Delhi met with Kashmiri separatists in August, the new Indian leader abruptly canceled planned foreign secretary-level talks. In mid-August, cross-border firing along the LOC intensified, leading to fears of escalation and potential collapse of a 2003 ceasefire agreement. The downturn in Pakistan-India relations is viewed by some as being orchestrated by a Pakistani military intent on taking full control of Pakistan's India policy, but numerous other factors, some domestic to India, are at play. Still, a recent opinion survey found 71% of Pakistanis expressing an unfavorable view of India.³⁷

Regional Commerce

An even more empowered Pakistani military is likely to further slow, if not altogether halt, the modest movement toward increased trade and economic relations with India that was initiated by Prime Minister Sharif. Although Islamabad struck a Transit Trade Agreement with Afghanistan in 2010, Pakistan continues to block most Indian access to that country, and thus to all of Central Asia via land. Any further stiffening of official Pakistani perspective on greater trade access for India could be harmful to an Obama Administration policy that seeks to better link India with Central Asia via a "New Silk Road." On a regional stage, such stiffening could be anathema to proponents of South Asian regional cooperation. Geopolitically, it could boost New Delhi's motivation to develop Iran's Chabbahar port, bypassing Pakistan for access to Central Asia, but also potentially engaging in mutually beneficial ties with a U.S. adversary.

Democratization

Whether Prime Minister Sharif sought out or merely acceded to the Army's late August intervention as a "facilitator" between the government and the protesters, most analysts contend that, because he has not demonstrated civilian control over domestic security, he will be left in a weakened state. This could have negative implications for U.S. efforts to strengthen Pakistan's democratic governance institutions. Any overt military ouster of Sharif could trigger another round of democracy-related U.S. sanctions on foreign assistance to Pakistan, potentially putting an indefinite halt to what has been one of the highest-priority American aid programs since 9/11.

³⁶ See Frederic Grare, "After Modi's Big Win, Can India and Pakistan Enhance Relations?" *National Interest* (online), August 11, 2014; "Military Blocking Pakistan-India Trade Deal, Says Shabaz Sharif," *Guardian* (London), February 13, 2014.

³⁷ See the August 27, 2014, findings at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/08/27/a-less-gloomy-mood-in-pakistan>.

Author Information

K. Alan Kronstadt
Specialist in South Asian Affairs

Samir Kumar
Research Associate

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.